Thus the story of the Odyssey can be stated briefly. A certain man is absent from home for many years; he is jealously watched by Poseidon, and left desolate. Meanwhile his home is in a wretched plight—suitors wasting his substance and plotting against his son. At length, tempest-tost, he himself arrives; he makes certain persons acquainted with him; he attacks the suitors with his own hand, and is himself preserved while he destroys them. This is the essence of the plot; the rest is episode.

—ARISTOTLE
(trans. S. H. Butcher)

Paul Bourget’s novel Le Disciple (1889) tells the story of Adrien Sixte, a mild-mannered psychology professor of deterministic convictions who leads a sheltered, well-ordered life, and of Robert Greslou, a young, self-appointed “disciple” of his, to whom he has provided counsel in his approach to graduate study. Greslou sends his former mentor a disturbing communication, a kind of clinical study of his own psychology. In it he reports that, obliged to work for a living, he had found employment as a tutor in a well-to-do noble family. Having taken a dislike to the proud and athletic eldest son and heir, André de Jussat, he determines to seduce his sister Charlotte, using the mechanistic causal principles he had so avidly gleaned from Professor Sixte’s writings. Man’s animal nature, conditioned response, total dominance of environmental and hereditary forces in determining the course of human lives: such notions form the theoretical basis of his plan to seduce the daughter of the aristocratic family with whom he now lives. Ever the scientist, Greslou describes his strategy in terms of a psychological experiment, something of a novelty at the time, when psychology was little more than a philosophical theory. At last, Charlotte yields herself
and her honor to the young tutor, but for one night only, with the understand- 
ing that she and her lover will both commit suicide thereafter. Charlotte eventually carries out her part of the suicide pact, but Greslou quickly discovers he has lost interest in suicide, and he fails to keep the bargain. Profiting from circumstantial evidence, André de Jussat has Greslou indicted for murder, even though he knows the truth of Charlotte’s suicide (she had written him a deathbed confession), for he hopes to conceal her dishonor. Awaiting trial in jail, Greslou has drafted his report and sent it off to Sixte. Having learned that Sixte also knows the facts, André at last tells the truth, and Greslou is released—only to be shot dead by André.

The power of causal chains is evident here on two levels. First, Greslou’s successful seduction demonstrates the dominance of psychological forces over will: Charlotte’s fears, sympathies, and animal desires have combined with the environmental influences of her upbringing and the wiles of the young tutor to produce, not only her moral downfall, but her “inevitable” suicide. Second, Robert Greslou is likewise the product of his hereditary nature and environmental influences, notably that of his middle-class origins (whence his inability to grasp Charlotte’s aristocratic concept of honor), and particularly that of the kindly professor with the deterministic doctrine. But the text is constantly working to undermine its own causal structure. Obviously, it paints Charlotte as delightful and admirable, while Robert Greslou appears as a self-centered and calculating scoundrel. If readers are morally outraged by Greslou’s conduct (and it is the “point” of the story that they should be), it is because they are insufficiently convinced of the inevitability of Charlotte’s fate to absolve him from responsibility for his calculated actions. It is difficult to believe that, despite his influences, he could not have turned back, could not have done otherwise. Then too, Robert, in his own embedded, first-person “report,” is surprised to discover that he feels remorse after Charlotte’s death; if he is merely the plaything of determining causal forces, why should he feel responsibility? And Sixte, in his free-indirect-style reflections, wrestles with a parallel problem: why should he feel guilty for the influence of his books on a young man’s life? Greslou failed to understand Charlotte (he understood her well enough to seduce her, but not well enough to forestall her suicide) or himself; Sixte had no notion of Greslou’s dangerous potentialities, nor of his own capacity for guilt. Thus the basic question to be asked of the narration (“Why is the ‘author’ telling us this?”) brings to light the conflict between the inferred author’s view and that of Greslou’s récit and Sixte’s thoughts. For
the inferred author, psychological causation, while apparently similar to the laws of cause and effect in the material world, has other, spiritual dimensions that render it far more complex. Notions of morality and honor escape the determinist's grasp.

While the quasi-religious and perhaps anti-intellectual underpinnings of this tale may make its message suspect, it uses causal chains in an interesting way to undermine causation as applied to the human psyche. The problem is that, with its traditional linear form, it must use what it condemns and understand what it presents as beyond understanding. It reveals the causes of the characters' failure to grasp certain causes, and precisely what causes they were unable to comprehend.

If the human psyche is to be portrayed as a world apart, with respect to causal influences, from the material world in which a cue ball imparts specific impetus and direction to a billiard ball, in which effects are predictable and quantifiable, then other sorts of novels, with different causal structures, are required for the task. From the Bergsonian-Saussurian era on, forms have been discovered (and rediscovered) which allow for the separation of the psyche from "everything else." Many of them are pericausal, in that they seek to elude or "go around" the problems imposed by linear causal structure, particularly in portraying the human mind and emotions. Some are structured to evoke kinds of causation specific to the psyche and different from physical causation. In this and the chapters to follow, I will illustrate six primary strategies that alter the rectilinear causal chains associated with psychological causation in traditional fiction, and with language itself.

Episodic structure has been around at least since the Odyssey, and it is still thriving. In the simplest terms, it provides a unifying central track, along which a number of sidetracks branch off. These may or may not lead back to the main line; when they do not, the reader is required to leap across a causal gap to find the central track, before setting off down the next branch. The branches are not causally connected to each other, except insofar as each has some causal bond to the main line. Many novels include the odd episode, but in truly episodic fictions they occupy far more space than do the elements of the unifying track.

In standard analysis, the main line is referred to as the plot. According to E. M. Forster's time-honored definition in Aspects of the Novel, a plot consists of those events that are interconnected by a causal chain. But, as we have seen, such interconnections can be made on all three levels of narrative,
and the notion of *plot* has thus become a highly complex one. Furthermore, Forster's definition contains an implied expectation of stasis: things would remain the same, he seems to say, unless causation intervened to change them. Causation is that which makes the "beginning" change to become the "end." But one can just as well start from an underlying expectation of change and see causation intervening to produce constancy. Our main line may involve change or constancy, and causation may be inferred as much for one as for the other. Its primary structural function is to provide an explicit or inferred basis for the sidetracks, which make up most (or even all) of the *récit*.

Since our subject is the strategies used to weaken or subvert linear causality, the particular structure under consideration here is that in which the sidetracks lead to dead ends. Indeed, insofar as any episode can be defined as distinct from *plot*, it must have an ending of its own, from which we leap back into the main course of events, or ahead into another distinct episode. These dead ends are breaks in the causal chain, but breaks of a specific kind, far different from the fragmentation we will examine in later chapters.

J.-K. Huysmans's *A rebours*, a standard *roman à tiroirs*, provides a clear example of a traditional linear plot dominated by multiple episodes. In it, Jean des Esseintes, ultimate scion of a degenerated aristocratic family, withdraws, fleeing the turbulence of Parisian life, to a *thébaïde raffinée* in Fontenay, where he leads a hermit's existence, until neurosis and disease force him to return, on doctor's orders, to a more social existence in Paris. The elements of the plot are few. The initial cause is the effete young man's extreme sensitivity, doubtless of hereditary origins, which produces in him a neurotic fear of disorder, and an equally neurotic desire to see himself as different from the common horde. The first event is the withdrawal to Fontenay. The second "event" is the establishment of a style of life which is at once ordered and different. He lives by night and sleeps by day, thus avoiding contact with his servants; with strict punctuality, he eats the simple meals set out for him according to menus established four times a year. His surroundings are both unusual and thematically organized: one room of his apartments is decorated like a ship's cabin; his bedroom imitates a (remarkably luxurious) monk's cell; his library, done in blue and orange, offers him the company of his exquisitely decadent collection of books; he steeps himself in rare wines and liqueurs, surrounds himself with exotic plants and perfume-making equipment. The third event is the actual
physical illness and exasperated neurosis arising from solitary nights passed in such surroundings. The final event is his decision to return to Paris, taken with a prayer on his lips: "Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute . . ." (p. 269); "Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts . . ."—suggesting a rebirth of faith. From the initial stative event onward, the story is that of a problem and an attempted solution which merely aggravates the situation, leading to admission of failure. The events just listed are the noyaux or "kernels" of the "plot," as Chatman calls them, and readers perceive them as "important," for the primary meaning of "important," with respect to traditional fiction, is "consequential," i.e., "belonging to a causal chain." ²

The episodes are examples of ways in which des Esseintes spends his time while ensconced at Fontenay. That these occupations contribute in some measure to his worsening health, there can be little doubt. But their contribution could easily have been summarized in a single chapter, if demonstrating their importance were the only aim, instead of the thirteen chapters (III through XV) that they actually fill. As examples, some of them at random could have been omitted, or they could be rearranged in a different order without altering the central track of the story. But they are more than examples: that the episodes dominate the central track is apparent, not only from their sheer volume, but also from their power. At one point, to illustrate that travel is a matter of perception rather than of action (the distinction between psyche and reality mentioned above), the inferred author has des Esseintes undertake a voyage to London; he gets no farther than the Gare Saint-Lazare—by that time he has seen enough fog and Englishmen, and eaten enough English food, to satisfy his craving for foreign travel. In order to insert this illustrative episode (chapter XI), the inferred author is obliged to postulate a sudden and causeless amelioration in des Esseintes's health, so that he is mentally and physically able to travel. Thus the linear direction of the main line—from bad to worse—is temporarily altered for the sake of an interesting episode. The main line will be moved, if necessary, to switch us onto a sidetrack.

Despite the frequent transitions, sidetracks are not causally interrelated. One of them begins, for example, with des Esseintes selecting plants to ornament his seclusion. He chooses bizarre hybrids which simulate metals or human flesh in leaves and petals. These choices, made as a consequence of his neurosis, lead to fevered sexual imaginings and finally to what we would call today a highly Freudian nightmare. The following
chapter (IX) begins: “These nightmares recurred: he grew fearful of going to sleep” (p. 136; “Ces cauchemars se renouvelèrent: il craignit de s'endormir”). To fill the sleepless hours, he decides to reorganize his collection of Goya prints. At this point, we have reached a dead end and started down another sidetrack. The causal chain does not continue, for the fear of sleep furnishes the condition for reexamining the Goyas, but not the cause: any one of numerous other activities could have been selected. When he discards the offending plants before turning to the prints (p. 137), we have reached a causal block. As for the new Goya branch, organizing the prints turns out to be purposeless, since des Esseintes fears to hang them: some fool might see and admire them, thus ruining the egocentric pleasure they hold for our hero. Here we reach another causal block and return to evocations of the feverish restlessness characteristic of the neurosis. The next branch begins with a decision to read “emolient” literature, to “refrigerate” his overheated brain: Dickens! But the chaste and blushing maidens he finds there, instead of calming his nerves, end up by reminding him of his own, less virginal loves—an American acrobat named Miss Urania, a female ventriloquist, and a young man who had sought directions of him in the street.

Thus the episodes, separated by causal blocks, form a series rather than a sequence; superficially connected at times by transitions, they are also often attached at their beginning to the main line, to show that they are causally born of the malady itself. Indeed, of the sixteen chapters, seven (VII, IX, X, XI, XIV, XV, XVI) leap back from a dead end to reconnect in this way at the beginning to the central track. The movement within the episodes is typically caused, however, and the direction of causation is usually from “real” stimulus to psychic state. Hideous houseplants evoke nightmares; readings (Dickens, medieval Latin texts) provide memories; the neighborhood of the Gare Saint-Lazare creates a mental image of London; perfumes resurrect the past. It is these psychic states—dreams, memories, hallucinations—which constitute the essential dead ends of the sidetracks. This particular causal organization is worth examining in both its structural and its thematic effects.

Structurally, this track-and-sidetrack mechanism establishes potential parallelism among the branches. Part of what the text loses in linear unity, it recaptures in unity-by-resemblance. The movements from present physical reality to psychic states create a pattern that sets repetition up as a competitor with causation for the “honor” of satisfying the readers’ quest for
unity in the novel. Repetition encourages reading of the text not as line but as space, an activity calling forth all manner of similarities: between the pet tortoise, whose shell des Esseintes gilds and bejewels to enliven the rug on which it crawls (thus caparisoned, it promptly dies), and our hero himself (also dying, in splendid isolation); between des Esseintes's taste in houseplants and Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal, which he admires; between the blending of liqueurs in the famous "mouth organ" and the blending of perfumes; among underlying similarities in all des Esseintes's preferences in art and literature. Indeed, "the ubiquitous references to artistic expression—prose, poetry, painting, music, interior decoration—establish the récit, by repetition, as highly "specular."" The description of the Gustave Moreau paintings of Salome's dance (chapter V), as a vision of the undermining of rational authority by the animal appetites, can be read as a model or matrix for Huysmans's novel, where life (corporal needs) destroys order (the perfectly regulated thébaïde): "Tel que le vieux roi, des Esseintes demeurait écrasé, anéanti, pris de vertige devant cette danseuse. . . ." (p. 89); "Like the old king, des Esseintes was left crushed, destroyed, overcome with vertigo as he beheld this dancer. . . ." John the Baptist's head, shining terrifyingly upon the platter in the watercolor, seems to prefigure the temptation of faith in the Lamb of the last page of the novel: will return to faith in Christ be still another dead-end hallucination or at last a truly liberating vision? The very creation by des Esseintes of the rarified atmosphere of his hermitage coincides with Huysmans's creation of the text, as it in turn becomes the reader's thébaïde. It is toward such fundamental connections that readers are guided by the parallelism of the sidetracks, and connection by comparison undermines the linear concatenations of causality.

Since causation is both potential structure and potential theme, when causal structures are nonrectilinear as in this novel, texts are weakened in their capacity for expressing, on the thematic level, the deterministic power of causation. But weakened or not, the determining forces here are far from powerless. The strong central chain, along which neurosis becomes psychosomatic illness, drives des Esseintes ineluctably to Fontenay, and just as ineluctably drives him out again. Causation does, however, tend to dissipate in the branches. His is then, in the Bergsonian sense, an interiorly undifferentiated psyche (one could not say what element of his consciousness led him, for example, to his Goya prints in particular), and at the same time an exteriorly differentiated one (a reader could scarcely predict that, by turning to Dickens, our hero would revive memories of his earlier exotic
lusts and moments of impotence, for the reader is not des Esseintes). But absence of clear causation here on the level of the histoire raises questions, as in Zola, on the level of the narration: why is the author breaking the chain? Since many sidetracks end in psychic states, it is apparent that the branches treat mental deterioration, while the central track, with its linear causation, has as its destination the physical degeneration of des Esseintes's body. Arrival, along the sidetracks, at various psychic states is effected primarily by the mechanism of psychological association. While I will explore this special type of causation more fully in subsequent chapters, it is essential to note here that this sort of causal connection (associations between plants and women, between Dickens's heroines and certain memories) is functional only in the mind; it is explainable but unpredictable. Odd hours, diet, and inactivity, on the other hand, are predictably ruinous to the body. One answer to our question is thus that the "author" is breaking the chain in order to distinguish between psychic causation on the sidetracks and physical causation on the main line of his story.

A second plausible answer is that the "author" wishes his character to have moments of unpredictability, moments when his reactions cannot be foreseen. Thematically, des Esseintes makes common cause with Taine (and "Adrien Sixte") in deploving the unpredictable and the spontaneous in his surroundings. He finds the inanimate more desirable than the animate, preferring locomotives to women and requiring that his live houseplants appear artificial. The famous tortoise with the gilded carapace soon obligingly becomes the decorative object it was purchased to be, when it dies; and the ornamental artifice of Fontenay is killing its master's body just as surely. Des Esseintes is delighted to recall that, by a psychological ploy, he was able to destroy a young marriage, and he is troubled by the thought that a similar deterministic experiment of his was apparently unsuccessful in transforming an indigent and abused lad into a thief and a cutthroat (chapter VI). Our former dandy adores the predictability of rigid, mechanism physical causality, but the application of such unwavering order to living things has its dangers. Either the unpredictable disorder of life will break through in hallucinations and dreams (psychological causation), or the unrelenting forces of physical causality will kill.

There is something of Rimbaud in des Esseintes's "visions," and both had tried nearly "all forms of love, of suffering, of madness." But Rimbaud was seeking freedom from determinism in poetry; des Esseintes is unproductive, and his visions are abortive dead ends. Indeed, in their very dead-
endedness, they doubtless contribute to his physical deterioration and the collapse of the noble experiment in Fontenay. Unless the last, religious "vision" is productive, des Esseintes belongs to the inevitable.

Huysmans, in his own life, was already on the way to selecting the religious sidetrack and making it his main line when Zola upbraided him for publishing *A rebours*: “with somber glance,” as Huysmans recalled, “he criticized me for the book, saying that I was dealing a terrible blow to naturalism, leading the school astray . . .” (“l’œil devenu noir, il me reprocha le livre, disant que je portais un coup terrible au naturalisme, que je faisais dévier l’école . . .”). The track-and-sidetrack structure is indeed more than a different way to organize the *histoire* of a novel. It is another sort of causal strategy, distinguishing between causation of the mind and of matter, exemplifying the richness of numerous parallel structures, and thus attacking as insufficient the mechanistic, rectilinear causality on which many of the most admired nineteenth-century novels had been plotted.

But after *A rebours*, how far could such a counterstructure go? The surrealist novel is perhaps the extreme example of the sidetrack approach. These novels are characterized by the fact that the psychic causation exists on the main line, while physical causes, such as there are, reside in the branches; by the strongly reality-referential character of the branches (these texts treat primarily real people and real places); and by the fact that the main line itself is present but scarcely explicit. Psychic causation still runs on a track separate from the physical in both our examples, Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), but its new position on the central track gives it the upper hand.

*Le Paysan de Paris*, which Pfomn calls felicitously “fiktionale Autobiographie,” consists of two itineraries; first the narrative voice takes us on a stroll through the Passage de l’Opéra (since destroyed to make way for the boulevard Haussmann), and then we follow a walk, taken by Aragon with Marcel Noll and André Breton in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont. The commercial establishments in the covered pedestrian walkways that made up the Passage are described in the order in which one would come upon them if one followed a specific course through the mall. If some mysterious or long-forgotten causal chains determined which shops should be neighbors, no allusion is made to that here: the establishments simply pop into the text in the order foreordained by reality itself, and without causal connection to one another. What makes this one come “before” that one and “after” that other one is the movement of the narrator’s itinerant psyche, as
he passes along the walkways. The timeline, which here makes up the central track, is that of the moving, observing, narrating mind; each commercial establishment it passes, it expounds upon, thus producing a series of dead-end sidetracks. The narrator here has the same name, and presumably the same personality traits, as the author who signed the manuscript. If the narrator is “real” and the Passage is “real,” where is the fiction? It lies precisely in that double distortion which comes from seeing first, and then from writing. The narrator’s vision is conditioned by all of his past experience and by his mood and preoccupations of the moment; his choice of words is influenced by everything from his vast cultural baggage to the reader he is imagining for his text. Narrator and author conjoin in this work to make up the implied author, who is himself the fiction.

The transformation of things into language through the medium of a reacting psyche is the fictional mechanism. Aragon is well aware that, as narrator, his vision is at all times fictionalizing reality, projecting the workings of his psyche upon it: “la nature est mon inconscient” (p. 153); “nature is my unconscious.” Under his mythologizing eye/pen, gasoline pumps acquire, for example, the identity of one-armed divinities or idols (p. 145). Aragon’s narrative is at once his world and his text:

Il y a dans le monde un désordre impensable, et l’extraordinaire est qu’à leur ordinaire les hommes aient recherché sous l’apparence du désordre, un ordre mystérieux, qui leur est si naturel, qui n’exprime qu’un désir qui est en eux, un ordre qu’ils n’ont pas plus tôt introduit dans les choses qu’on les voit s’émerveiller de cet ordre, et impliquer cet ordre à une idée, et expliquer cet ordre par une idée. (P. 234)

(There is an unreasonable disorder in the world, and the extraordinary part is that ordinarily men have sought, beneath the appearance of disorder, a mysterious order, which is so natural to them, which expresses nothing but a desire which lies within them; and no sooner have they projected that order into things than you see them marvel at that order, and implicate that order into an idea, and explicate that order by an idea.)

One of the primary pleasures of reading this text is the discovery of the identity of the narrative voice through its linguistic reflection in things, seen and described. If the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont is henceforth for me vaguely vulviform, it is because the Aragonian psyche/text reflects it that
way. Aragon and his two companions "attendent de ces bosquets perdus sous les feux du risque une femme qui n'y soit pas tombée" (p. 166); "dans les jardins publics, le plus compact de l'ombre se confond avec une sorte de baiser désespéré de l'amour et de la révolte" (p. 174); "Dans les plis du terrain où tout les sollicité, ils sont les jouets de la nuit" (p. 175); "il y a cette femme dans chaque idée qu'enfin je cerne" (p. 208); "Ainsi l'univers peu à peu pour moi s'efface, fond, tandis que de ses profondeurs s'élève un fantôme adorable, monte une grande femme enfin profilée, qui apparaît partout" (p. 209); "Ainsi retrouvant l'inflexion heureuse de ta hanche ou, le détour ensorceleur de tes bras dans le plus divers des lieux, . . . je ne puis plus parler de rien que de toi-même" (p. 211); "tu t'es levée sur ce parc" (p. 212). In this evolving feminization of the park, if causation enters the process, it is on the level of the narration: why is the author/narrator seeing/writing the world this way? The origin of the constant "desire which lies within" him, of the order that he has "projected . . . into things," is nowhere explicit. But some velitation between id and superego is being mediated on the page.

Thus a vast domain is opened to reader inference. Two places in Paris of which readers supposedly have some memory form the matter of the récit. Comparison of our vision of the places to the Aragonian description suggests the nature of the difference between each of us and the inferred author. That difference will lie in the kinds of mental connections he and we tend to invent among the multifarious realities—that "unreasonable disorder"—in order to reason the inherently meaningless chaos. And since there are two quite separate walks (the Passage and the Parc), we have two fictional Aragos, two inferred authors, to compare to each other and to ourselves. What such inference—doubtless different for each reader—yields is a set of psychic causes conditioned by a linguistic code; for, as the nature of the psyche itself is the cause of its reflection in the world of things, so the limits of textualization determine how that reflection becomes text.

In *Nadja* as well, André Breton's "je" is virtually the only referent to a continuous central track from which the branches spring. The sidetracks are a series of anecdotes from which the narrator (who is "André Breton"—what that name means is a central question) not only omits much causal vocabulary, but in which he also adopts the strategy of denying explicitly the role of human intentions in events. Consider the way he prepares, in this supposedly autobiographical text, the account of his first encounter with *Nadja* in the street:
Le 4 octobre dernier, à la fin d’un de ces après-midis tout à fait désœuvrés et très mornes, comme j’ai le secret d’en passer, je me trouvais rue Lafayette: après m’être arrêté quelques minutes devant la vitrine de la librairie de L’Humanité et avoir fait l’acquisition du dernier ouvrage de Trotsky, sans but je poursuivais ma route dans la direction de l’Opéra. Les bureaux, les ateliers commençaient à se vider, du haut en bas des maisons des portes se fermaient, des gens sur le trottoir se serraient la main, il commençait tout de même à y avoir plus de monde. J’observais sans le vouloir des visages, des accoutrements, des allures. Allons, ce n’étaient pas encore ceux-là qu’on trouverait prêts à faire la Révolution. (Pp. 57–58)

(Last October 4th, at the end of one of those completely idle and very dull afternoons I have the secret of spending, I found myself in the rue Lafayette: after stopping for a few minutes in front of the display window in the bookstore of L’Humanité and acquiring Trotsky’s latest work, I was continuing aimlessly toward the Opera. Offices and factories were beginning to empty; from top to bottom in the buildings doors were closing; on the sidewalk people were shaking hands; anyway there were beginning to be more people about. Unintentionally I was observing faces, clothing, ways of walking. Come now, those still weren’t the folks we’d find ready to launch the Revolution.)

The initial date (Breton later specified the year: 1926), like the place names, is a phenomenological marker, denoting the nonfictional character of the events to follow. In reality, where events occur wordlessly, causation is never explicit; we observe what happens, but the “why” remains a matter for interpretation. As narrator, Breton appears to strive to keep his text “phenomenological,” devoid of causal interpretation. But he goes farther: had he said nothing, readers might well infer, on the level of the histoire, that he had gone to the rue Lafayette to pick up a copy of the latest Trotsky. But Breton specifically blocks the inference: he was spending idle time and simply “found himself” there. Afterward, he walked “aimlessly,” observing passersby “unintentionally.” The people about him seem scarcely more capable of willed actions: it is the inanimate offices and workshops that are closing, as if without human intervention. It is difficult to avoid the transitive verbs that imply causality, but Breton manages: simply and impersonally, “there were beginning to be more people about.” Even the causation inherent in “faire la Révolution” is negated.
One may perhaps infer the causes of the negative conclusion: these workers are too satisfied with their milieu ("se serraient la main"), or too prosperous ("accoutrements"), or too mechanized by the routine that governs their lives (daily "rush-hour" events) to be ready to rebel. But the conclusion, like the purchase of the Trotsky text, is itself an event and therefore a potential cause. It is clear that serious political preoccupations are dominating the narrator's mind, so strongly that he carries out a political analysis of the crowd in spite of himself. But here again, a causal block falls in place. These events are not preparatory to the composition of a political tract: the narrator is about to "pick up" a young woman in the street. These then are noncauses, a narrative dead end; why give these details at all if they are not relevant to what follows? Their relevancy lies, of course, precisely in their stressed irrelevance: "There I was, thinking about the liberation of the working class, when this woman walked by. . . ." The inferable intent of the narration is to demonstrate the discontinuous, non-linear, noncausal character, both of real phenomena and of the consciousness that observes them. If there is to be any linear constant in this anecdotal text, it will have to reside in the omnipresent "I," but below the level of the consciousness. Gaps here, just as in Zola, send the reader to the level of the narration, in search of unifying links; that the inferred author knows of and seeks this reaction is apparent in his careful presentation of "extraneous" details in the context of a preparation, and in the strategy of causal blocks it conditions. If readers eventually conclude that subconscious forces were at work in Breton's life, it will be largely because explanations were available neither on the level of the récit, where the paucity of causal vocabulary eliminates them, nor on the level of the histoire, where blocking strategies deny them.

We will later learn that Nadja too was walking quite at random ("sans but aucun," p. 59), so that this first meeting seems to be a chance occurrence, an effect of le hasard objectif. Nadja is, of course, "l'âme errante" (p. 69)—"the wandering soul"—the very essence of movement without conscious cause. She invites Breton to make up a story of random elements, carefully underscoring the relationship of life to text:

pourquoi ne veux-tu pas jouer? Eh bien moi, c'est ainsi que je me parle quand je suis seule, que je me raconte toutes sortes d'histoires. Et pas seulement de vaines histoires: c'est même entièrement de cette façon que je vis. (Pp. 73–74)

(Close your eyes and say something. It doesn't matter, a number, a first name. Like this [she closes her eyes]: Two, two what? Two women. What do they look like? They're in black. Where are they? In a park. . . . Then what are they doing? Come on, it's so easy; why won't you play? Well me, that's the way I talk to myself when I'm alone and tell myself all sorts of stories. And not just useless stories: that's even completely the way I live.)

With a new and spontaneous “choice” to be made for each word or phrase, the story comes to life more vertically (movement at each “choice” from subconscious to consciousness) than horizontally (movement from preceding words to following words). As a sample matrix or model for this fictional autobiography as a whole, Nadja's text simulates, in its interruptive questions, the causal blockers of Breton's prose; his apparently random selection of anecdotes mirrors her spontaneous choice of words. But the very surface fragmentation sets one searching for a deeper cause: in a novel, we seek it in the narration; in life (“that's even completely the way I live”), we look toward the subconscious. These surrealist texts conjoin narration, narrator's subconscious, and main line in a single entity.

Another model for Nadja is to be found in the story of Les Détraquées, a play which had so greatly impressed Breton that he saw it three or four times. In it, two deranged women, both teachers in girls' schools, do away with a student in the boarding school that one of them administers. The victim is drawn into the murderesses' clutches by a chance occurrence: a ball the little girls are playing with in the courtyard happens to bounce through a window into the office where the two women are, and their intended victim enters to retrieve it. As Breton tells the story, there is a suggestion that the teachers had killed another pupil the year before, but the evidence is purely inferential, as is indeed the explanation of this year's murder: spectators do not see the crime, only the girl's entrance and the subsequent discovery of the body. We may be certain, on the level of the histoire, that the women did her in, but Breton's interest is drawn precisely to the absence of explicit causal links:
Le manque d'indices suffisants sur ce qui se passe après la chute du ballon, sur ce dont Solange et sa partenaire peuvent exactement être la proie pour devenir ces superbes bêtes de proie, demeure par excellence ce qui me confond. (P. 45)

(The lack of sufficient clues about what goes on after the ball bounces, about just what Solange and her partner may be prey to in order to have become such superb beasts of prey, is what supremely leaves me perplexed.)

What is missing is not causation (Breton indeed infers that the women are prey to some diseased desire), but "indices" of its existence. That the author's analysis of the play points out the importance of causal gaps reveals the use he makes of causality in his own text: profiting from readers' need for it in the absence of all "indices," he employs a lack to make them discover or generate a profound psychic causation for what happens. Blocking inferences on the level of the histoire, he sends readers directly to the narration.

The relationship of this causal strategy to psychoanalytic dream analysis is obvious and explicit in the novel. In a rare causal link, the narrator recounts a dream he had, partly inspired by certain episodes of Les Détraquées, partly by his recent observation of a mother bird stuffing insects into the craws of its young. Conscious, waking impressions provide the vocabulary of our dream language, which the subconscious of course restructures, juxtaposing remembered impressions to fit a psychic syntax. Breton remarks on the "eminently revealing" role, "in the highest degree 'overdetermining' in the Freudian sense," which conscious images play in dream formation (p. 47). It is the search for the "revelation" in the psychic syntax, for the cause of the particular selection and structuring of dream images, that constitutes the groundwork of Freudian dream analysis. The logic applicable to psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams applies as well to the reading of this novel.

A markedly heterogeneous series of events, noted and remarked upon by a "same" psyche: for reading such a text, the logic required is simple abstraction—comparison of anecdotes, retention of those factors common to most episodes as representative of the informing psyche, and elimination of heterogeneous factors as related to dream vocabulary rather than syntax. Comparison of the sidetracks in Nadja hints at the presence of certain constants, a common preoccupation, a possible reason why these things
should, in particular, stimulate the narrator’s interest. A likely psychic state behind the selection of these episodes might be the tension between physical attraction toward women and fear of them, leading to fear of intercourse and possible impotence. (The dream just mentioned includes the “particularly reprehensible” fraud of inserting one sou in the slot of an automatic machine, where two were called for.) Although Nadja’s vertically constructed, highly spontaneous style of life is strongly valorized in the text, the inferred author also perceives it as dangerous:

... un soir que je conduisais une automobile sur la route de Versailles à Paris, une femme à mon côté qui était Nadja, mais qui eût pu, n’est-ce pas, être toute autre, et même telle autre, son pied maintenant le mien pressé sur l’accélérateur, ses mains cherchant à se poser sur mes yeux, dans l’oubli que procure un baiser sans fin, voulait que nous n’existassions plus, sans doute à tout jamais, que l’un pour l’autre, qu’ainsi à toute allure nous nous portassions à la rencontre des beaux arbres. Quelle épreuve pour l’amour, en effet. (P. 143)

(. . . one evening as I was driving an automobile on the road from Versailles to Paris, a woman beside me who was Nadja, but who could have been any other—right?—and even that other, with her foot holding mine pressed down on the accelerator, and her hands seeking to cover my eyes in the forgetfulness an endless kiss procures, desired that we cease existing, doubtless forever, except for each other, and that we be borne thus at top speed to a meeting with the lovely trees. What a test for love, indeed.)

Whether this sexual tension truly subtends the text, whether it is discovered there or generated by my own propensities, are less important questions in this context than the logic used to reveal it. For that logic implies a parallel tension, between the unique (and therefore heterogeneous) and the comparable (and therefore repeated). Nadja herself signifies radical difference and the impossibility of repetition (“Les Pas perdus? Mais il n’y en a pas,” [p. 70]; “Wasted Steps? Why there aren’t any”). Yet the inferred author is constantly comparing, noting for example a perceived similarity between Nadja’s eyes and those of the actress playing Solange in Les Dernières (p. 58). Even in the automobile anecdote he keeps comparing—“any other,” “that other”—in the narrative midst of what could have been for him a genuinely unique experience! Love and fear, he seems to say, the
What is disconcerting about reading surrealist novels as avatars of the plot-and-episode structure is that, in the plot, nothing happens. But that "nothing" is, precisely, an event. The real world, as we consciously perceive it, is multifarious, disconnected, inexplicable—a heterogeneous collection of unrelated existents. One should expect, in these conditions, that the perceiving mechanism, bombarded on all sides by multiple, radically differentiated phenomena, would itself be transformed from moment to moment. The astonishing thing is that, instead, it organizes, unifies, connects the flood of differentiated impressions that assail it, selecting for memory the most useful and making a mental language of them. This unexpected changelessness of the observer has a cause, in theory: the ineluctable functioning of the subconscious according to the Freudian system. The power of causation, of explicable and predictability, lies therefore on the main line just as much in Aragon and Breton as in Huysmans.

For the earlier novelist, the psyche is unpredictable, while the physical world is subject to relatively foreseeable causal factors. The surrealists have turned that around, while retaining similar structures. The central track (explicit in *A rebours*, inferable in the surrealist texts) is essential to an understanding of all three texts; it also plays a unifying role and generates the required contrasts: psyche/reality and unity/diversity.

And yet, what is this "understanding," this constant, unifying psyche, if not one more inference, by definition unproven? Is a changeless psyche behind it all, or have I, like Aragon's human observers, been introducing my own "natural" order into these texts, only to discover it there and marvel at it? The prime difference between Aragon's observers and readers is that the latter confront texts rather than universal chaos. Insofar as textuality is a *condition* of writing, texts are bounded by linguistic limits, which insinuate conceptuality (exemplified by the merger of "seeing" and "writing" we observed in Aragon) and intentionality into them, as surely as they consist of "discourse." For while it is theoretically possible to write without conceptualizing or intending, discourse, narrative discourse, would hardly be the result. The resources of language, of textualization, thus play a causal role, as a condition of our inferences. One can point to a "unifying textuality" (e.g., recurring words, metaphors, the gradual feminization of the landscape in Aragon's picture of the Parc des Buttes-
Chaumont) just as accurately as to a unifying unconscious: the intent of narration is intent of text, as well as intent of "author."

The purely inferential character of the main line in Aragon and Breton makes their structures easy to confuse with the absurdist fragmentation strategies and with the structures of mental representation, both of which we will consider later. This is perhaps the place to underscore the basic distinctions. Like episodic tales, absurdist fragmented stories include radical causal breaks and blockers, assemblages in the histoire of apparently unrelated events, and generally homodiegetic narrators. But the fragmented stories call into serious question causal explanations in general, including notions of a structuring or structured psyche; and despite the breakdown in causality (or perhaps because of it) chronological order re-acquires significance. Even though events are unrelated in the récit unrelatable in the histoire, it is inferably important to the narration that they occur in a given order: there can be little question of interchanging episodes, as in our three track-and-branches novels.

Novels of mental representations, common in France since the 1950s, string together a series of "mental images" as perceived by a psyche (whether in perception or memory, by hypothesis or imagination) and textualized. Des Esseintes’s dream qualifies as an “imagination” of this sort, while subjective perceptions and recollections characterize the surrealist texts. But des Esseintes’s nightmare, embedded as it is in a clearly referential third-person récit of specific detail, is obviously connected to a fictionally “real” world. The surrealists also rely heavily on objective reality—real people, places the reader knows. Breton provides numerous photographs with his text, perhaps as a means of marking the causally unrelated or (in the modern sense) “contingent” nature of reality, as it stands in contrast to the unifying subconscious of the narration. Recontextualized, the photographic images are also textualized, but they retain their differences from words. The more recent “novels of mental representation” tend to abandon their reality-referential components (even when they allude to historical places or events): the contrast psyche/reality is gone, and only the psyche (or the text . . .) remains. Reality, if we seek it in such texts, will be neither causally related nor “contingent,” but what it is perceived to be; in the most extreme cases, referentiality will elude us, and with it the causal model, leaving only a text. Surrealism still pretends to an inferable intent, lurking beneath the seemingly disparate episodes.
Notes


7. Aragon and his two companions “are expecting from these groves, lost beneath the fires of risk, a woman who is not there by chance”; “in the public parks, the densest of shade blends into a kind of desperate kiss of love and rebellion”; “In the folds of the terrain, where everything calls out to them, they are the playthings of the night”; “in each idea that at last I grasp, there is this woman”; “Thus the universe fades away for me and melts, while from its depths an adorable phantom ascends, an immense woman arises at last clearly outlined, appearing on all sides”; “Thus rediscovering the pleasant curve of your thigh or the bewitching bend of your arms in the most diverse of places . . . , I can speak of nothing but you”; “you have risen upon this park.”

8. Nadja refers to the title of Breton’s 1924 work, *Les Pas perdus*, which contains (among other things) an allusion to the term “salle des pas perdus” — “waiting room” (“room of wasted steps”).